

# THE NUMEROUS FAMILIES OF FORMER TIMES.\*

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In the course of my researches into the origin of the poorer classes, I have searched a great number of ancient registers of the Civil State, particularly those of the town of Poitiers. The following was the problem before me. The class of the poor originates in two ways; one the unadaptable element which from the very beginnings of civilisation, has, by reason of its inferior faculties, or owing to the presence of hereditary vices which hold it back, never been able to rise; the other coming from individuals of the middle and upper classes, who, by reason of bad crosses, of acquired taints, such as alcoholism or syphilis, are brought either directly or as the result of accidental circumstances into the group of the poor, and who do not succeed in rising out of it again in one or two generations, as do those whose social fall is due to economic causes. I shall publish the result of these researches, but I should like now to draw attention to a certain number of rather important points.

We have known for a long time that the birth-rate in former times was much greater than that of to-day without however, the population increase being more rapid. From the very beginning of my investigation I was able to confirm that if families were very numerous, the number of those offspring which in their turn founded families was very small, which made the necessary balance. I then isolated in order to study them more in detail, families of bourgeois traders, above the poverty line, where mortality due to misery and bad hygiene prevails, and I have followed them for two or three centuries. The results at which I have arrived are common to the generality of these families and bring out clearly the conjugal habits of a whole class in a Provincial town during the centuries which preceded the Revolution. It is most probable that life took the same course in other cities.

Marriages were between near neighbours, rarely with nobles or with persons of a lower class. One sees little trace of any desire or feeling for a rise in class. The daughters do not marry before 20—25 years, often later when their domestic and commercial education has been finished. The first birth follows sometimes nine or ten months after marriage, and rarely is delayed to the end of the second year. Births follow each other in a regular and rapid succession with one or two years' interval. They are always numerous and often very

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numerous. Sometimes the same wife has twelve to eighteen living children. If she dies in labour, usually she is quickly replaced and the succession continues as before.

Lactation seems to have been the rule. If otherwise, the child was placed with a wet-nurse in the country. Lactation did not prevent the continuation of sexual relations and very often the death of a suckling child was followed a few months afterwards by another birth. Infant mortality was enormous but we cannot evaluate it exactly. First, the child dying when with a wet-nurse outside Poitiers, cannot be traced, and further the very little ones were not always mentioned in the Register of Burials, as their death had no interest, civil or ecclesiastical. So at times the Priest was contented to add to the entry of the baptism a note which often passes unnoticed in extracting the register, and which therefore does not appear in the tables,—“*Obiit die*”. . . so there are no exact statistics possible. But to judge by the number of names which never reappear with marriage, or death, or in wills, I judge that a half and even more than that number of children never arrived at adult age; a very high figure in a wealthy class.

When I go through the genealogies set out as tables, I am struck by the fact that the number of children who survived and founded a family in their turn is about the same as to-day; two, three, rarely more. The others remain unmarried, work in the house, rarely away, the elder girls or the aunts are busied in helping the mother to bring up her flock. Many become priests or nuns, but my personal information makes it possible to say that in this category were found many whose descendants would have been undesirable.

The result of this low marriage rate is that those families (about thirty) which have been the basis of my work, were almost all extinct before the Revolution or soon after. There only remained, as far as I know, half-a-dozen in the middle of the nineteenth century. The names of the others have disappeared which of course does not exclude the probability of descendants in the female side. Several of these families swarmed over to America or emigrated wholly in the last quarter of the eighteenth century to San Domingo, New York, Canada. I think they still continue on the other side of the Atlantic and in New York, Detroit, Montreal, I have been able to see their descendants. They have kept their prolific habits and seem to be widely diffused and greatly multiplied without changing their profession as traders.

From the above we have the result that the fine families of former days with their respect for conjugal duty, their superabundant natality, nevertheless only contributed a small part to the development of the population in general; in fact gave to the wealthy and cultivated classes but little better results than the restricted families of to-day; in fact this high natality was expressed in the wearing out and the premature death of the mothers, the infant death of the greater part of the children and a great expenditure of effort, care and wealth ending only in mourning. The major harvest was clearly for the undertaker.

In order to illustrate this résumé I will give an example of a line followed from about the time of Louis XIV to our day, and which in direct descent and as regards immediate collaterals corresponds in all circumstances to the group described above.

De Nivenne, Samuel, master of Châtelliers, merchant; husband of Magdelaine Bonneau by whom he had at least 16 live children. Date of marriage unknown. Births:—Etienne 1700; Samuel 1701; Gabriel 1703; Marie-Magdelaine 1704; François 1705; Jacques 1707, baptised Parish St. Didier; François Louis 1708; Marie 1710; François-Marie 1711; Pierre 1712; Louis 1713, baptised Parish St. Germain; François 1714; Jeanne 1716; Gabriel 1718; Jeanne 1719; Louis 1721, baptised Parish St. Didier.

Births almost annual, 16 in 21 years. Mean succession 15 months. We find no trace of descendants of these sixteen children who almost all died at a very early age.

Samuel had a brother, Gabriel, married to Marie Joyeux, also a merchant. Date of marriage: St. Didier, 13th January 1699. First birth Marie-Magdelaine, 15th December 1699, at the end of eleven months, then Marie-Anne 1700, then Marie-Magdelaine who survived and married at St. Didier, 17th June 1726, Hubert Renard, with issue. The mother, Marie Joyeux died 14th September 1701. The widower remarried Anne Roustière, and had Martin-Gabriel 1703, then died in his turn.

The family in spite of these 20 births, disappears without male issue.

Magdeleine de Nivenne, daughter of François de Nivenne, merchant, and of Magdeleine Mitault, and sister of the above, had surviving numerous descendants in the two worlds. She married at St. Didier, the 12th April 1706, François Duclos, merchant and furrier, by whom she had at least 11 children born alive.

Births: Marie-Magdelaine 24 January 1770, at the end of nine months and twelve days; François 1708; Louis 1709; Samuel 1710; all baptised at St. Didier; then Michel 1712, baptised Notre-Dame la Grande; probably other children baptised also at Notre Dame la Grande, where my researches have not been completed; Marguerite, born near 1717, buried at the age of five at St. Didier, 14th May 1722; then François-Savin and Barthélemy, twins, 1718; Catherine Félicité 1719; Joseph 1720; Marie-Anne-Gabrielle 1722; all of St. Didier.

Of these eleven children only three were married and have left descendants; François, Joseph and Marie-Magdelaine, who married 19th May 1741 at St. Didier, François Gauffreau.

This Gauffreau belonged to a family of appalling fecundity which is extinct as regards males though it survives in the female line.

His father, Nicolas, husband of Marie Chenagon, cloth and silk merchant, married at St. Didier, 16th June 1697, and had at least ten children baptised at St. Didier: Claude-Barthélemy 1698; Jean 1699; Jacques 1700; Marie-Judith 1702; Jean-Didier 1703; Vincent-Claude 1705; François 1706; Jeanne-Florence 1707; Louis 1711; Marie-Jeanne 1713. Claude Barthélemy appeared to have had only one son who died shortly after birth. François on the other hand had an abundant posterity. Two girls died just after baptism and six others as young children.

Louis-Claude Gauffreau, brother of Nicolas and uncle of François, had at least twelve children by his marriage with Marie Joulain, all baptised at Notre Dame la Grande, the first coming every year, then a little more slowly, beginning with the eighth.

Claude-Hilaire 1705; Louis-Claude 1706; René-Claude 1707; Félix 1708; Marie-Françoise 1709; Suzanne 1711; André 1712; Michel-Antoine-René 1713; Louise 1715; Jeanne 1718; Thérèse 1721; Louis-Claude 1723. Many early deaths. One monk, at least one Carmelite nun, and only one marriage, that of Michel-Antoine-René, also a cloth and silk merchant, who had four children by Marie-Anne David, and died two months before the birth of the last. All baptised in Notre-Dame la Grande. François-Louis-Claude 1749; Antoine-Claude 1750; Louis-Claude 1752; Marie-Anne Marthe 1755. The two Louis died early. Antoine-Claude became a monk in Notre-Dame, and Marthe became historic Mother of Priests under the "Terror" and died, although she escaped the Guillotine, without marrying. Of the twelve children of Louis-Claude and Marie Joulain and their four grandchildren, no descendant survived.

François Gauffreau, silk and cloth merchant in his first marriage took Marie-Anne-Détois, St. Didier, 14th June 1729, by whom at least six children. At the end of nine months Marie-Louise, baptised Notre-Dame la Petite, 17th March, 1730; then François-Gabriel 1731; Jacques-Joseph 1732; Marie-Catherine 1733; François-Joseph 1734; Joseph-René 1735; all baptised at St. Didier. Marie-Anne Détois was buried at St. Didier 4th December 1739. The boys died at an early age and the girls round about the sixties, unmarried.

Of the marriage with Marie-Magdeleine Duclos, already 34 years of age, François had at least nine children baptised in St. Didier. François 1742; François-Victor 1743; François-Louis 1745; Marie-Magdelène 1746; François 1748; Marie-Radégonde 1750; Louise-Céleste 1751, Louis-Victorin 1752; Pierre-Thomas 1757. Three married,—François-Victor with Catherine-Hélène Thoreau, François, born in 1748, with Marie-Elisabeth Doré, Marie-Radégonde with Alexandre Ribet. All three had descendants. Marie-Radégonde married at 40 years in 1790. Had only one daughter. Her two brothers had a less restricted posterity, but of these I have only incomplete records. Both in fact emigrated to San Domingo about 1785 and their descendants are dispersed in America after the massacre of the "Whites."

From the pair Gauffreau-Doré we know of four children from division of the property of François. One married in New York, and had at least seven children settled in New York, Montreal and Cuba. The descendants are known through a law suit over the undivided property with the descendants of Ribet in the middle of the last century, and they are continuing to develop in America.

François-Victor married Catherine-Hélène Thoreau, daughter of Jacques Thoreau, a goldsmith, and of Hélène Robin de la Peschellerie, a family with a very high birth-rate like the preceding ones, and whose emigration to America was the cause of that of the Gauffreus. The eldest son was sawn between planks by his negroes. One daughter returned to France, remained unmarried. Another married, 4th October 1791, Notre-Dame, Jean-Gilles Hindré, of an old noble Breton house, administrator of the district of Poitiers, who died speedily leaving one son, Alexis-François-Patriote, born in Poitiers, 6th July 1792, after nine months.

Alexis, surgeon, anatomist, histologist, continued the family

traditions and by his wives had fourteen children, of whom nine were brought up, seven married, and six had issue these, very limited, two or three children, with the exception of Aimé who had six children, two with few descendants. The descendants of Alexis who all are still living, are women, so the name is becoming extinct.

*To sum up:—*

- (1) *Samuel de Nivenne*. 16 children without descendants.  
*Gabriel*. Four children. Descendants through one daughter, now extinct.  
*Magdelaine*, married Duclos. Eleven children. Descendants through two sons and a daughter, married to Gauffreau.
- (2) *Gauffreau Nicolas*. Ten children. Descendants through his son François.
- (3) *Gauffreau Louis-Claude*. Twelve children. Descendants through one son, Michel-Antoine-René, none of whose four descendants married.
- (4) *Gauffreau Francois, and Marie-Anne Détois*. Six children, few descendants. With *Magdelaine Duclos* (see above) eleven children. Descendants through two sons and one daughter.

For want of documents it is not possible to give a complete account of these two sons, François Victor, husband of Thoreau, and François, husband of Doré, and of their American descendants, only of the descendants of Hélène, married to Hindré.

(5) *Hindré Alexis*. Fourteen children, five with descendants. Of the couple Hindré-Gauffreau, descendants are only on the female side.

Thus 31, plus 10, plus 12, plus 17, plus 14=84 children. With descent, 1, plus 3, plus 1, plus 1, plus 5 = 11, which is exactly one-seventh, and the names Nivenne, Gauffreau and Hindré are extinct.

From the biological point of view we here encounter a very high fecundity from the commercial élite. It demonstrates the absence of venereal infection and shows in homogeneity heredity. This favours the embryonic development without hereditary discordance such as arrests development in a mixed population. All these families living through two or three centuries under an endogamous regime have made now one only.

From the economic point of view we find the same application as to-day in the case of only sons; but they arrived at it by selection, leaving to the most able the task of carrying on the family, the business and the home, where the unmarried might continue to live if they so desired.